

# THE DOCTOR'S HORSE

BY MARY E. WILKINS

THE Horse was a colt when he was purchased with the money paid by the heirs of one of the doctor's patients, and those were his days of fire. At first it was opined that the Horse would never do for the Doctor: he was too nervous, and his nerves beyond the reach of the doctor's drugs. He shied at every way-side bush and stone; he ran away several times; he was loath to stand, and many a time the Doctor in those days was forced to rush from the bedsides of patients to seize his refractory Horse by the bridle and soothe and compel him to quiet. The Horse in that untamed youth of his was like a furnace of fierce animal fire; when he was given rein on a frosty morning the pound of his iron-bound hoofs on the rigid roads cleared them of the slow-plodding country teams. A current as of the very freedom and invincibility of life seemed to pass through the taut reins to the Doctor's hands. But the Doctor was the master of his Horse, as of all other things with which he came in contact. He was a firm and hard man in the pursuance of his duty, never yielding to it with love, but unswervingly stanch. He was never cruel to his Horse; he seldom whipped him, but he never petted him; he simply mastered him, and after a while the fiery animal began to go the Doctor's gait, and not his own.

When the Doctor was sent for in a hurry, to an emergency case, the Horse stretched his legs at a gallop, no matter how little inclined he felt for it, on a burning day of summer, perhaps. When there was no haste, and the Doctor disposed to take his time, the Horse went at a gentle amble, even though the frosts of a winter morning were firing his blood, and every one of his iron nerves and muscles was strained with that awful strain of repressed motion. Even on those mornings the Horse would stand at the door of the patient who was ill with old-fashioned consumption or chronic liver-disease, his four legs planted widely,

his head and neck describing a long downward curve, so expressive of submission and dejection that it might have served as a hieroglyphic for them, and no more thought of letting those bounding impulses of his have their way than if the Doctor's will had verily bound his every foot to the ground with unbreakable chains of servitude. He had become the Doctor's Horse. He was the will of the Doctor, embodied in a perfect compliance of action and motion. People remarked how the Horse had sobered down, what a splendid animal he was for the Doctor, and they had thought that he would never be able to keep him and employ him in his profession.

Now and then the Horse used to look around at the empty buggy as he stood at the gate of a patient's house, to see if the Doctor were there, but the will which held the reins, being still evident to his consciousness even when its owner was absent, kept him in his place. He would have no thought of taking advantage of his freedom; he would turn his head, and droop it in that curve of utter submission, shift his weight slightly to another foot, make a sound which was like a human sigh of patience, and wait again. When the Doctor, carrying his little medicine-chest, came forth, he would sometimes look at him, sometimes not; but he would set every muscle into an attitude of readiness for progress at the feel of the taut lines and the sound of the masterly human voice behind him.

Then he would proceed to the house of the next patient, and the story would be repeated. The Horse seemed to live his life in a perfect monotony of identical chapters. His waiting was scarcely cheered or stimulated by the vision and anticipation of his stall and his supper, so unvarying was it. The same stall, the same measure of oats, the same allotment of hay. He was never put out to pasture, for the Doctor was a poor man, and unable to buy another horse and to spare

him. All the variation which came to his experience was the uncertainty as to the night calls. Sometimes he would feel a slight revival of spirit and rebellion when led forth on a bitter winter night from his stolidity of repose, broken only

athwart his stall and he felt the Doctor's hand at his halter in the deep silence of a midnight, he would sometimes feel himself as a separate consciousness from the Doctor, and experience the individualizing of contrary desires.



HE WAS A FIRM AND HARD MAN IN THE PURSUANCE OF HIS DUTY

by the shifting of his weight for bodily comfort, never by any perturbation of his inner life. The Horse had no disturbing memories, and no anticipations, but he was still somewhat sensitive to surprises. When the flare of the lantern came

Now and then he pulled back, planting his four feet firmly, but he always yielded in a second before the masterly will of the man. Sometimes he started with a vicious emphasis, but it was never more than momentary. In the end he

fell back into his lost state of utter submission. The Horse was not unhappy. He was well cared for. His work, though considerable, was not beyond his strength. He had lost something undoubtedly in this complete surrender of his own will, but a loss of which one is unconscious tends only to the degradation of an animal, not to his misery.

The Doctor often remarked with pride that his Horse was a well-broken animal, somewhat stupid, but faithful. All the timid women folk in the village looked upon him with favor; the Doctor's wife, who was nervous, loved to drive with her husband behind this docile horse, and was not afraid even to sit, while the Doctor was visiting his patients, with the reins over the animal's back. The Horse had become to her a piece of mechanism absolutely under the control of her husband, and he was in truth little more. Still, a furnace is a furnace, even when the fire runs low, and there is always the possibility of a blaze.

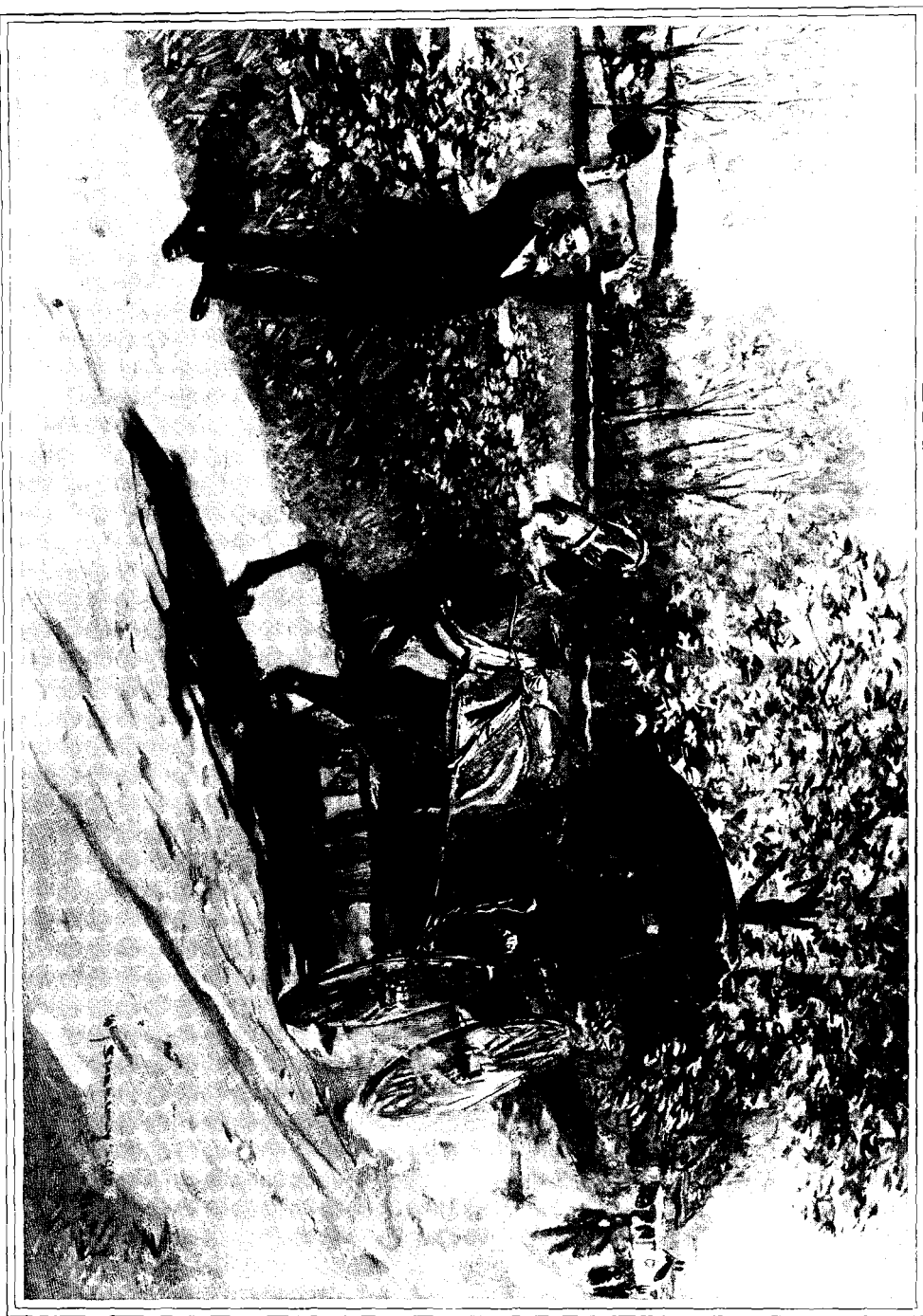
The Doctor had owned the Horse several years, though he was still young, when the young woman came to live in the family. She was the Doctor's niece, a fragile thing, so exposed as to her network of supersensitive nerves to all the winds of life that she was always in a quiver of reciprocation or repulsion. She feared everything unknown, and all strength. She was innately suspicious of the latter. She knew its power to work her harm, and believed in its desire to do so. Especially was she afraid of that rampant and uncertain strength of a horse. Never did she ride behind one but she watched his every motion; she herself shied in spirit at every way-side stone. She watched for him to do his worst. She had no faith when she was told by her uncle that this Horse was so steady that she herself could drive him. She had been told that so many times, and her confidence had been betrayed. But the Doctor, since she was like a pale weed grown in the shade, with no stimulus of life except that given at its birth, prescribed fresh air and, to her consternation, daily drives with him. Day after day she went. She dared not refuse, for she was as compliant in her way to a stronger will as the Horse. But she went in an agony of terror, of which the Doctor

had no conception. She sat in the buggy all alone while the Doctor visited his patients, and she watched every motion of the Horse. If he turned to look at her, her heart stood still.

And at last it came to pass that the Horse began in a curious fashion to regain something of his lost spirit, and met her fear of him, and became that which she dreaded. One day as he stood before a gate in late autumn, with a burning gold of maple branches over his head and the wine of the frost in his nostrils, and this timorous thing seated behind him, anticipating that which he could but had forgotten that he could do, the knowledge and the memory of it awoke in him. There was a stiff northwester blowing. The girl was huddled in shawls and robes; her little pale face looked forth from the midst with wide eyes, with a prospectus of infinite danger from all life in them; her little thin hands clutched the reins with that consciousness of helplessness and conviction of the Horse's power of mischief which is sometimes like an electric current firing the blood of a beast.

Suddenly a piece of paper blew under the Horse's nose. He had been unmoved by fire-crackers before, but to-day, with that current of terror behind him firing his blood, that paper put him in a sudden fury of panic, of self-assertion, of rage, of all three combined. He snorted; the girl screamed wildly. He started; the girl gave the reins a frantic pull. He stopped. Then the paper blew under his nose again, and he started again. The girl fairly gasped with terror; she pulled the reins, and the terror in her hands was like a whip of stimulus to the evil freedom in the Horse. She screamed, and the sound of that scream was the climax. The Horse knew all at once what he was—not the Doctor, but a Horse, with a great power of blood and muscle which made him not only his own master, but the master of all weaker things. He gave a great plunge that was rapture, the assertion of freedom, freedom itself, and was off. The faint screams of the frightened creature behind him stimulated him to madder progress. At last he knew, by her terrified recognition of it, his own sovereignty of liberty.

He thundered along the road; he had no more thought of his pitiful encumbrance



"HE THUNDERED ALONG THE ROAD."

of servitude, the buggy, than a free soul of its mortal coil. The country road was cleared before him; plodding teams were pulled frantically to the side; women scuttled into door-yards; pale faces peered after him from windows. Now and then an adventurous man rushed into his path with wild halloos and a mad swinging of arms, then fled precipitately before his resistless might of advance. At first the Horse had heard the Doctor's shouts behind him, and had laughed within himself, then he left them far behind. He leaped, he plunged, his iron-shod heels touched the dash-board of the buggy. He heard splintering wood. He gave another lunging plunge. Then he swerved, and leaped a wall. Finally he had cleared himself of everything except a remnant of his harness. The buggy was a wreck, strewn piecemeal over a meadow. The girl was lying unhurt, but as still as if she were dead; but the Horse which her fear had fired to new life was away in a mad gallop over the autumn fields, and his youth had returned. He was again himself—what he had been when he first awoke to a consciousness of existence and the joy of bounding motion in his mighty nerves and muscles. He was no longer the Doctor's Horse, but his own.

The Doctor had to sell him. After that his reputation was gone, and indeed he was never safe. He ran with the Doctor. He would not stand a moment unless tied, and then pawed and pulled madly at the halter, and rent the air with impatient whinnies. So the Doctor sold him, and made a good bargain. The Horse was formed for speed, and his lapse from virtue had increased his financial value. The man who bought him had a good eye for horseflesh, and had no wish to stand at doors on his road to success, but to take a bee-line for the winning-post. The Horse was well cared for, but for the first time he felt the lash and heard curses; however, they only served to stimulate to a fiercer glow the fire which had awakened within him. He was never his new master's Horse as he had been the Doctor's. He gained the reputation of speed, but also of vicious nervousness. He was put on the race-course. He made a record at the county fair. Once he killed his jockey. He used to speed along the road drawing a man

crouched in a tilting gig. Few other horses could pass him. Then he began to grow old.

At last when the Horse was old he came into his first master's hands again. The Doctor had grown old, older than the Horse, and he did not know him at first, though he did say to his old wife that he looked something like that Horse which he had owned which ran away and nearly killed his niece. After he said that, nothing could induce the Doctor's wife to ride behind him; but the Doctor, even in his feeble old age, had no fear, and the sidelong fire in the old Horse's eye, and the proud cant of his neck, and haughty resentment at unfamiliar sights on the road, pleased him. He felt a confidence in his ability to tame this untamed thing, and the old man seemed to grow younger after he had bought the Horse. He had given up his practice after a severe illness, and a young man had taken it, but he began to have dreams of work again. But he never knew that he had bought his own old Horse until after he had owned him some weeks. He was driving him along the country road one day in October when the oaks were a ruddy blaze, and the sumacs like torches along the walls, and the air like wine with the smell of grapes and apples. Then suddenly, while the Doctor was sitting in the buggy with loose reins, speeding along the familiar road, the Horse stopped. And he stopped before the house where had used to dwell the man afflicted with old-fashioned consumption, and the window which had once framed his haggard, coughing visage reflected the western sunlight like a blank page of gold. There the Horse stood, his head and long neck bent in the old curve. He was ready to wait until the consumptive arose from his grave in the church-yard, if so ordered. The Doctor stared at him. Then he got out and went to the animal's head, and man and Horse recognized each other. The light of youth was again in the man's eyes as he looked at his own spiritual handiwork. He was once more the master, in the presence of that which he had mastered. But the Horse was expressed in body and spirit only by the lines of utter yielding and patience and submission. He was again the Doctor's Horse.